

University of Groningen

Learning from parents

Bouma, Helen; Grietens, Hans; López López, Mónica; Knorth, Erik J.

Published in:
Child and Family Social Work

DOI:
[10.1111/cfs.12723](https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12723)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bouma, H., Grietens, H., López López, M., & Knorth, E. J. (2020). Learning from parents: A qualitative interview study on how parents experience their journey through the Dutch child protection system. *Child and Family Social Work*, 25(S1), 116-125. [13]. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12723>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Learning from parents: A qualitative interview study on how parents experience their journey through the Dutch child protection system

Helen Bouma¹  | Hans Grietens² | Mónica López López¹ | Erik J. Knorth¹

¹Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

²KU Leuven, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Parenting and Special Education Unit, Leuven, B-3000, Belgium

Correspondence

Helen Bouma, MSc; Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care; Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences; University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands.
Email: helen.bouma@rug.nl

Funding information

Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek

Abstract

The quality of parents' experiences with the child protection system (CPS) is related to the outcomes of their family's process in the system. The importance of collaboration with parents in child protection is underpinned by human and children's rights conventions addressing the right for family life and parents being first responsible in fulfilling children's rights. We interviewed 20 parents about their experiences with the Dutch CPS. Our thematic analysis shows that a CPS serving the best interests of their children is most important to parents. To realize this, professionals should (1) "not let it happen but do something," (2) "get a clear picture of the family's situation," and (3) "take parents seriously." Parents emphasize that a system providing sufficient "money, time, and knowledge" is needed to facilitate professionals. Their experiences seem to influence their trust in the system and their attitude towards it. This study shows new insights in parents' experiences, such as their advice to professionals to determine the truth and to be decisive. This deepened knowledge about parents' experiences is essential for evaluating and improving the CPS.

KEYWORDS

child protection, parents' experiences, qualitative study, semistructured interviews, the Netherlands, thematic analysis

1 | INTRODUCTION

The quality of parents' experiences with child protection practice and their attitude towards the child protection system (CPS) have been linked to the outcomes of families' trajectories in the system. For instance, Ghaffar, Manby, and Race (2012) report that conflicts between parents and professionals and, as a result, unnecessary placements and additional stress for children may be avoided by positive experiences of parents. Therefore, understanding parents' unique perspectives about the CPS seems essential for evaluating and improving services (Ayala-Nunes, Jiménez, Hidalgo, & Jesus, 2014; Morris, 2012; Petersen, 2018; Tilbury, Osmond, & Crawford, 2010; Trotter, 2008).

The literature review of Ghaffar et al. (2012), as well as the studies of Smithson and Gibson (2017) and Studsrød, Willumsen, and Ellingsen (2014), shows that parents' experiences with the CPS are rather mixed. Several studies reveal the importance of a *relationship-based approach* for gaining positive outcomes in child protection (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Ghaffar et al., 2012; Reekers, Dijkstra, Stams, Asscher, & Creemers, 2018; Smithson & Gibson, 2017). First, the *attitude* of professionals is important: Parents value characteristics as being committed, interested and honest, spending time with the family to get to know them and their situation, showing respect and empathy, and acknowledging their strengths, efforts, and motivation (Ghaffar et al., 2012; Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Studsrød et al., 2014).

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2019 The Authors. Child & Family Social Work published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Second, Dumbrill (2006) describes the *power* of professionals in the relationship with parents as having a key role in shaping their perceptions and reactions to child protection interventions. Finally, several studies on parents' experiences with the CPS focus on *parents' participation* and report on the importance of transparency, being listened to, being taken seriously, consideration of their points of view, and involvement in decision-making (e.g., Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Ghaffar et al., 2012; Healy, Darlington, & Feeney, 2011; Morris, 2012; Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Studsrød et al., 2014). In addition to relational aspects, studies show the influence of *organisational aspects* on parents' experiences, such as the complexity of services, the number of agencies and professionals involved, and the high turnover of professionals (Dale, 2004; Ghaffar et al., 2012; Healy et al., 2011; Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Studsrød et al., 2014).

Next to this consistent body of research evidence, children's and human rights conventions acknowledge the importance of *partnership with parents* for bringing about positive experiences and thereby enhancing the chance of favourable outcomes in child protection. In the implementation of children's rights to protection (Article 19, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC), it is essential for the State to cooperate with parents as rights' holders and as primarily responsible for the fulfilling of these rights. According to human and children's rights conventions, children and parents have the right for family life, and children have the right to be raised by their own parents (Article 7, UNCRC; Article 8, European Convention on Human Rights). Although parents are primarily responsible for the upbringing and well-being of their children, States have the responsibility to undertake all appropriate measures for the implementation of children's rights (Article 4, UNCRC) by supporting parents in enabling them to fulfil children's rights and by intervening in family life when this is needed in the best interests of the child.

However, in the context of child protection, professionals often face dilemmas in the fulfilling of children's rights and working in partnership with parents. For instance, when deciding on intervening in family life, professionals need to balance children's right to protection (Article 19 UNCRC) and their right to be raised by their parents (Article 7 UNCRC). Furthermore, research shows how professionals can experience a tension between children's interests and parents' interests and resistance of parents in child protection, which can complicate professionals' relationship with parents (Fargion, 2014; Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012; Munro & Ward, 2008).

The principles of the UNCRC and European Convention on Human Rights are present in the Youth Act 2015, which forms the basis for the Dutch youth care system. The Youth Act 2015 aims to give parents and children more influence on the quality of care by talking *with* instead of *about* them and by considering parents and children as *agents* of their own lives. The care relationship should be the starting point for intervening, and governmental intervention should focus on the recovery and reinforcement of the own strengths, problem-solving abilities, and responsibilities of parents, children, and their social network, aiming to prevent care dependency (formulated as "from care to participation") (Memorie van Toelichting Jeugdwet, 2013). With its focus on interaction with families, the care

relationships and strengths, the Dutch CPS could be characterized as a *family-oriented* child welfare system (Fargion, 2014; López López, Bouma, Knorth, & Grietens, 2018).

This study aims to gain in-depth insight into the experiences and views of parents who have been involved in child protection in the recently reformed Dutch CPS. Knowledge about the experiences of parents makes understandable what families need according to parents and how the CPS can support this. It also provides insight into parents' advices for the CPS. Moreover, this study has a democratic value as it pays attention to parents' voices and reflections on the CPS; it gives parents the opportunity to reflect on a system that has a high impact on their lives (Alpert, 2005; Smithson & Gibson, 2017). With this study, we aim to answer the following research question: How do parents experience their "journey" through the Dutch CPS? An innovative characteristic of our study is that we investigate not solely one phase of the chain of child protection or one intervention strategy but parents' experiences with their journey through the different phases of the CPS and their experiences with different child protection measures and interventions.

2 | METHODOLOGY

We used a qualitative approach to study the experiences of parents with the Dutch CPS. We believe that the knowledge we will gain is socially and experientially based and value dependent. For instance, experiences of parents can change over time and be influenced by recent events (Bergman et al., 2012). Furthermore, we are aware that we, as researchers, have an active role in the construction of the meaning of parents' experiences, via our own beliefs and assumptions and the interactions we have with the parents while telling their stories. Therefore, reflexivity is required to give insight in (the rationales for) our choices (Probst, 2015; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

2.1 | Participants

Two agencies are involved in executing child protection investigations within the Dutch CPS. The Advice and Reporting Centre Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment (in Dutch: *Advies- en Meldpunt Huiselijk Geweld en Kindermishandeling*—AMHK) can advise the caller, investigate reports and refer families to organizations offering voluntary support. The Child Care and Protection Board (in Dutch: *Raad voor de Kinderbescherming*—RvdK) investigates whether compulsory child protection measures are necessary and can request the juvenile court to enforce this. Within this system, families can have an investigation of the AMHK as well as the RvdK (in the same child protection process when the AMHK refers to the RvdK after their investigation or at different points in time when the family has another investigation at a later moment). The juvenile court can enforce a supervision order, in which the parental authority is partly taken over by a guardian, or end the parental authority. During a supervision order, the child can remain at home, but the juvenile court can also enforce an out-of-home placement (Memorie van Toelichting, 2013).

2.1.1 | Recruitment

We invited parents who had been involved in a child protection investigation, as this could be seen as the starting point of involvement in the CPS. We invited parents who had an investigation after January 1, 2015, to reflect on the new CPS under the Youth Act 2015. To ensure that we focused on child protection, we excluded AMHK cases focusing solely on (domestic) violence between adults, such as elderly abuse, and investigations of the RvdK focusing on custody, juvenile justice, or adoption. Furthermore, as we wanted parents to be able to reflect on the decision that was made, as well as on the intervention phase after the investigation, we only included "closed" case files and case files in which a decision by the juvenile court was taken. In two locations of the AMHK and the RvdK, letters and an opt-in form to the selected parents were sent out. Parents could send us the opt-in form or contact us by phone or email.

2.1.2 | Sample

The child protection agencies sent out 254 invitations. Out of 222 invitations sent by the RvdK, 20 parents contacted us to discuss participation or their questions about the study; 16 of them finally decided to take part. The 32 invitations of the AMHK led to two replies by parents, but only one of them decided to participate. Besides replies to those invitations, participants brought us in contact with four other parents, of which three agreed to be interviewed.

We conducted 20 interviews with parents (13 mothers and 7 fathers), all biological parents from different families. For most parents, the AMHK and the RvdK had been involved in their family and a compulsory supervision order—in some cases with an out-of-home placement of one or more children—had been enforced. In some cases, parents did not have parental authority (anymore) and/or did not have contact with (some of) their children at the moment of the interview. For one parent, only the AMHK and voluntary care had been involved (see also Table 1). This implies that for all families in this sample, except for one parent, compulsory child protection measures were enforced. None of the parents were still living with the other parent of their children. However, although violence and ongoing conflicts between parents during or after their divorce were important reasons for child protection involvement in this sample, these were not the only reasons for involvement; there were several other reasons such as psychological problems of parents and suspicions of physical and sexual abuse of children.

2.2 | Data collection

We explored the experiences of parents using semistructured, episodic interviews (Flick, 2014). In the interviews, the narrative of parents was followed, which gave them the opportunity to tell their story in their own words and to address what was important for them. The semistructured approach ensured that the different phases of the

TABLE 1 Characteristics of parents who participated in this study

Participant	Child protection measure	Contact with their children at the time of the interview?
Mother	Several child protection investigations resulting in different measures for the children: parental authority ended; supervision order + out-of-home placement; supervision order	No contact with one of the children
Father	Supervision order	Yes
Mother	Supervision order	Yes
Father	Supervision order	Yes
Mother	Supervision order + out-of-home placement	Yes
Father	Supervision order	Yes
Mother	Supervision order	Yes
Father	Voluntary care involved	No
Mother	Supervision order + voluntary out-of-home placement	Yes
Mother	Supervision order	No
Mother	Supervision order	No contact with one of the children
Mother	Supervision order	Yes
Mother	Supervision order	Yes
Mother	Supervision order + out-of-home placement	Yes
Father	Supervision order	No
Mother	Supervision order	No
Mother	Supervision order	Yes
Mother	Supervision order	Yes
Father	Supervision order	No
Father	Supervision order + out-of-home placement	Yes

chain of child protection were discussed: the report, the investigation, and the intervention. We discussed topics on parents' experiences with professionals, their participation, and what was helpful or unhelpful during the child protection process. At the end of the interview, by reflecting on their experiences, we asked for their advices about the CPS (Baarda, De Goede, & Van der Meer-Middelburg, 2007).

All interviews were conducted by the first author between July 2016 and July 2017, face to face and in most cases at parents' homes (parents could choose the location of the interview). The duration of the interviews depended on the narrative of the parent. Most

interviews lasted between 30 and 120 min; one interview took 4 hr. Parents were given the opportunity to receive and read the transcript of their interview and were informed about the progress and the results of the study.

2.3 | Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed literally by three research assistants and the first author. Using Nvivo 11 (Mortelmans, 2011), we conducted a thematic analysis. We analysed the transcripts in an inductive, semantic, and reflexive way. We focused our analysis on *what* parents said and did not analyse parents' emotions or *how* parents shared their stories. By coding the interviews inductively in an open, bottom-up way without trying to fit the data in a preexisting coding book, we aimed to provide a rich description of all data. The phases of our analysis were characterized by a flexible, iterative, reflexive process, moving back and forward between the steps as revisiting the raw data was often needed to clarify new questions, to further develop definitions of themes, refine focus and understandings, and ensure that we stayed close to our data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Probst, 2015; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

First, we *familiarized ourselves* with the data by reading the transcript and listening to the audiotaped interview. During this active way of reading, we started writing down our initial ideas about the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mortelmans, 2011).

Second, we *coded* the data of each interview in a semantic way, bearing our research question in mind. In line with the inductive approach, we coded the interviews in an open way in which the codes identified were strongly linked to the data themselves, for instance *"the word child protection is very nice, but when you don't do anything with this..."* (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Third, we organized these codes into overarching *clusters* to find possible relationships between individual codes. This resulted in a collection of clusters with underlying codes per interview. For instance, we clustered codes like the one above under *"They don't offer the children protection."* We checked this collection of clusters on whether it represented the story of the parent in a good way, by getting back to the raw data, which led to redefining and restructuring of the clusters. We visually represented the links between the clusters in a diagram and explained the relationship between clusters in a synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This extensive reflexive process helped us to check our understanding and interpretation of the interviews.

The previous steps, all conducted by the first author, resulted in 20 individual sets of clusters with each an additional diagram and explanatory synthesis to show the links between the clusters. In the fourth step, the research team started to work with the data of all the interviews together; we tried to identify links between all clusters and organized these in *themes*. We reviewed these by reading the underlying clusters, codes, and coded text fragments to consider whether each theme adequately captured the coded data and whether the clusters and their underlying codes and coded data fitted under the overarching theme. As there were multiple clusters in the different

interviews regarding the protection and best interests of children such as the cluster presented above, this resulted in a theme *"It is all about the child."*

In the final step, we represented the links between the themes in a *thematic network*, which helped us to understand the overall story of the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.4 | Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Pedagogical and Educational Sciences at the University of Groningen in May 2016. The data were anonymized by deleting identifiable information such as names and residences. In this article, we ensured parents' anonymity, by providing only limited background information of each parent and describing the sample in general terms. Furthermore, as we wanted parents to feel comfortable during the interview, we gave them freedom and choice in what they wanted to share with us. Therefore, we did not ask explicitly for background information such as educational level, socioeconomic background, migration background, and reason of the report.

The data were stored at the secured network of our university and only accessible for the researchers who are involved in the study and signed a confidentiality agreement. The parents signed an informed consent document and were notified that all information would be reported anonymously and handled with confidentiality, but that this confidentiality was limited in the case of concerns about the safety of family members.

3 | RESULTS

Our analysis resulted in 11 basic themes and a thematic network of one global theme and three organizing themes (Figure 1). The global theme in parents' experiences is *"It is all about the child."* Parents' experiences whether the involvement of the CPS serves the best interests of their children seem to be determined by their experiences with the following three organizing themes: *"Don't let it all happen but do something," "Get a clear picture of the situation,"* and *"Take parents seriously."* The remaining two basic themes represent parents' feeling that the overarching system should *"provide enough money, time, and knowledge"* to enable professionals to fulfil these three organizing themes and *"the attitude of parents towards the CPS"* as an outcome of their experiences with the three organizing themes.

3.1 | It is all about the child

Parents emphasize that it should be all about their children; they recognize and describe that their children are suffering and therefore want support to change the situation. For example, a mother describes that it is not about her or the father, but all about her children, as they suffer from the divorce. Parents have different experiences whether the CPS succeeds in this, that is, whether they find the

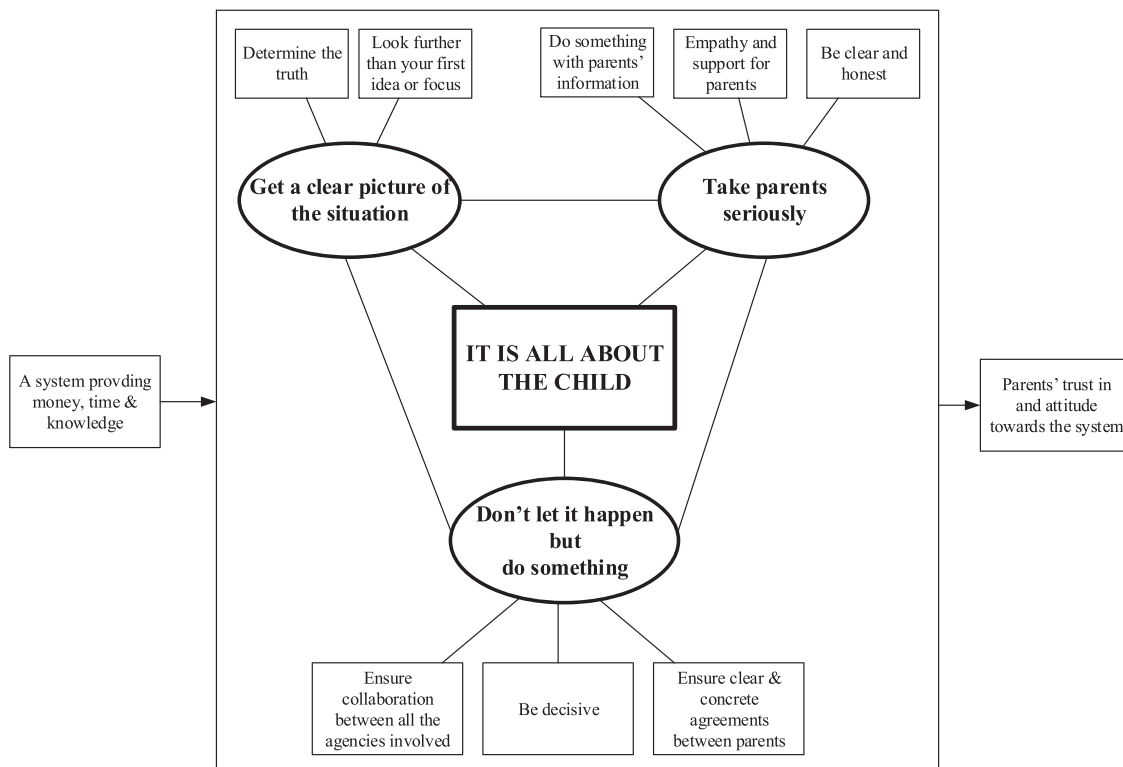


FIGURE 1 Thematic network of parents' experiences

intervening of the CPS helpful and whether the CPS is able to protect their children. Although all parents mention positive and negative experiences, some parents are mainly negative, whereas other parents address mostly positive experiences. Whereas one mother expresses that she and her children benefit from the support, other parents experience that the system is not always offering protection and not standing for the best interests of the children. For example, a father reports that the focus is too much on protecting organizations' liability and following protocols: *"I don't feel that the best interest of the child really comes first."*

3.2 | Do not let it happen but do something

When looking back at their experiences with the CPS, most parents acknowledge that the family's situation is harmful for their children, agree with the intervening of the CPS, and want professionals to act in the best of their children to reduce the potential harm as soon as possible. They express that in order to ensure this change, professionals should not let it happen but be *decisive*, provide *concrete agreements* with and between parents, and guarantee the *collaboration* with all the agencies involved.

However, many parents experience that *"nobody did anything"* to change the family's situation, despite many concerns known by professionals. A mother explains: *"They don't do anything, and they see that it is not okay. [...] You know it, but you don't do anything."* Parents express their disappointment about this inaction. Besides parents who feel that the intervening of the CPS does not change anything or

makes it even worse, some parents recognize how it helps them. For instance, a father describes how the supervision order ended *"the war"* between parents and secured contact with his child again.

First, parents argue that in order to *"do something,"* professionals should be *decisive*. Whereas some parents think that professionals need more authority to be able to be decisive, for example, to make decisions on behalf of parents, other parents report that professionals do not always dare to be decisive and give their own opinion.

Second, parents state that *clear and concrete agreements with and between parents* are needed to be able to achieve change. They describe their situation as complex and often stagnating, because of communication problems and allegations between parents and, in the case of a divorce, practical issues such as the need to sell their house and to make agreements about the finances. A father explains how the agreement *"Friday afternoon"* in the contact arrangement regarding the children makes parents arguing every Friday, as a concrete time is missing. Parents argue that clear, concrete agreements with and between them are helpful for professionals to keep parents to the agreements and essential to diminish the room for discussion between parents.

Third, to be able to improve the family's situation as soon as possible, *good collaboration between the many agencies involved* is needed, by good communication and exchanging information. A mother explains how important the presence and information of her psychiatrist at a meeting with youth care professionals was: *"When they can explain that. [...] Finally, finally they understand."* Many parents experience the CPS as complex, because many agencies and professionals are involved. They perceive some agencies and professionals as

insular, lacking good communication and collaboration. As a consequence, you “*have to start all over again*” within each agency.

3.3 | Get a clear picture of the family's situation

In order to be able to decide on adequate support to change the situation for the children, professionals need to have a clear picture of the family's situation. To achieve this, they need to *determine the truth* and avoid a tunnel vision by *looking beyond their first judgements*.

First, parents address that a clear picture of the family's situation can be missing due to the lack of adequate investigations for *determining the truth*. Parents feel that professionals do not always check the veracity of what is said and as a result the reports may contain lies, untruths and mistakes: “*It seems that someone can say anything, as long as they are convincing in what they say.*” Untruthful content can be incorporated in subsequent reports impacting next evaluations and decisions, and resulting in wrong conclusions and decisions. Parents emphasize that observations and consultation with people in the direct environment could help to determine the truth.

Second, parents argue that, to be able to comprehend the family's situation, professionals need to *look further than the focus of the report or their first judgements*. Many parents perceive that professionals are not open to new or other signals and focus too much on their first judgements. For instance, several parents describe how their situation was quickly labelled as a “high conflict divorce.” Parents consider this focus makes that other concerns are not taken into account or “*ring some alarm bells*” and that they are not taken seriously when rising other issues: “*I was of course seen as the woman of the high conflict divorce.*” Furthermore, parents address that due to an excessive focus on the divorce there was no room to discuss the period prior to the divorce, although knowing the background is necessary to understand the family's situation.

3.4 | Take parents seriously

In order to change the family's situation in the best interests of the child, it is important for parents to be taken seriously, by *doing something with the information* they provide, being *treated with empathy and receiving support*, and by being *honest and clear*. Parents state that their well-being is important for their children's well-being. They want the best for their children, can provide important information and are open to or even ask for help.

First, parents argue that professionals need to *do something with the information they provide*. Many parents feel listened to but experience that their story did not have any influence. A mother says: “*They did listen to me, but they didn't do anything with it. Does it make any sense to undertake such a conversation then? Was it just for me to let off steam or?*” As a consequence some parents feel powerless: “*It all happened to me. [...] I often felt that I stood by and watched.*”

Second, it is important for parents to *be treated with empathy and to receive support* by professionals involved. The situation that led to

the report as well as the involvement of the CPS is affecting them. Several mothers express that after the domestic violence they feel afraid during the meetings attended by the fathers. Furthermore, the involvement and decisions of the CPS can affect the self-esteem of parents, as a mother explains: “*Then, you start questioning: what am I, am I a monster?*” Besides this, the long process in the CPS complicates parents' lives. A mother tells that it is not possible for her to find a job, as there is still no clear contact arrangement regarding the children. Besides understanding and empathy, parents emphasize that they need support: personal support as some parents experience psychological or physical problems themselves, as well as family support and support for their children. A mother who requested a supervision order herself because of severe behavioural problems of her son explains: “*As there is someone who supports me in my authority, and has some more power than I. That is nice.*” Parents value professionals who are there for them and available when they need help.

Third, parents want professionals to be *honest and clear* towards them, so that they know where they stand and clear agreements can be set. A lack of clarity can make the child protection process unclear and unpredictable. Some parents mention that “*things happened behind their back*”; a father explains that the guardian never involved him in the support plan regarding the supervision order: “*In this [case file] is an action plan which I should have met, and when I didn't meet this, my son would go to my ex. I didn't have this action plan!*”

3.5 | Money, time and knowledge

Overall, parents address that a system providing enough money, time, and knowledge is needed to enable professionals to act, to get a clear picture of the family's situation, and to take parents seriously. Many parents with mainly negative experiences emphasize that professionals are trying their best and that the problems are caused by the overarching system, as a father states: “*Everyone knows and everyone does what they can, but everyone is actually being, I think so, even a sort of hindered by the system in which they have to work.*” They experience that professionals have a too high workload and therefore do not have enough time for them. This also results in a high turnover of professionals. A mother tells that the investigation report was written by a professional who was not involved in the investigation: “*Because of the understaffing, they had hired people.*” Besides time, some parents express the need of investing in the knowledge of professionals (e.g., about psychiatric problems), as they “*decide about the lives of people.*”

3.6 | Attitude of parents towards the CPS

Parents who experience that professionals do something to change the family's situation for the best of the children, who experience that professionals have a clear picture of the family's situation, and who feel taken seriously, seem to have more trust in the system. A mother explains how the supervision order brought her calmness: “*At some point you don't know what to do anymore. Yes, you think you are doing it*

wrong, and then you ask for help and they come. They explain why they come. That brings some calmness as well, for us." Parents who feel that the involvement of the CPS did not help their family seem to experience mistrust. Those parents express the need to be cautious and to collect evidence, for instance, by recording phone calls with professionals and being watchful of what they say and what they do: "As a parent you have to be aware of what you say and how you say it." Moreover, the attitude of some parents who were positive and hopeful about the involvement of the CPS could change due to their disappointment; some of these parents express that they want to "get rid of" the supervision order and advise other parents "to stay out of the CPS."

4 | DISCUSSION

This study aimed to provide insight into parents' experiences with the Dutch CPS. We interviewed 20 parents, using an episodic semistructured format. As in the study of Smithson and Gibson (2017), it was a key point in parents' experiences whether the involvement of the CPS achieved change. Our results show that the overarching theme in parents' experiences was "It is all about the child." The interviews gave us insight in what is according to parents important to bring a positive change and serve their children's needs: Do not let it all happen but do something, get a clear picture of the family's situation, and take parents seriously. For this, a system providing enough money, time and knowledge is needed. A CPS serving the best interests of their children shapes positive attitudes towards the system.

Our theme "Take parents seriously" is in line with other studies on the relationship between professionals and parents. Furthermore, "being there" for parents by being available and contactable and responding to parents' requests for help is found as a theme in other studies as well (Dale, 2004; Ghaffar et al., 2012; Healy et al., 2011; Smithson & Gibson, 2017).

In addition, parents' experiences focused on two other themes: "Don't let it all happen but do something" and "Getting a clear picture of the family's situation." Petersen (2018) reports that despite that many parents agreed with or even initiated the intervening themselves, they were in the end dissatisfied about the help. As in our study, undertaking action to react on parents' requests for help and the easiness and fast progress in arranging this were important topics for parents. Studsrød et al. (2014) reported also that parents' experiences were related to whether they received the appropriate help. However, the link with interagency collaboration, decisiveness, and the need for concrete agreements between parents is not that explicitly reported by Studsrød et al. (2014) nor by Petersen (2018).

The theme "Getting a clear picture of the family's situation" by determining the truth and looking further than your first idea is also not reported in other studies. Some studies report that spending time with the family is important to understand their situation and difficulties (Ghaffar et al., 2012) and that parents have negative

experiences with professionals who already had made up their mind and drawn conclusions beforehand (Studsrød et al., 2014). However, important discourses in our study like "they have to determine the truth" and "don't label it too easily as a high conflict divorce" are not reported in other studies. These are important issues in recent debates about the Dutch CPS (Hoogveld, 2015; Nu.nl, 2015; RvdK, 2017, 2018; Vriesema, 2017).

4.1 | Strengths and limitations

This study provides in-depth information on the experiences, values, and needs of parents who are involved in the Dutch CPS under the Youth Act 2015. One of the major strengths of this study is that it involves parents who have received mandatory child protection measures. This group has traditionally been recognized as a hard-to-reach population. The recruitment of parents with child protection services is a very challenging and time-consuming activity, and it requires creating a safe environment for them to feel comfortable to share their experiences and views. Furthermore, this study shows the ability of parents to provide detailed descriptions and balanced feedback about helpful and unhelpful approaches; all parents reported both positive and negative experiences and distinguished characteristics of professionals and organisational aspects. By analysing parents' feedback thoroughly in a reflexive, inductive way, this paper contributes to the understanding of strong elements and possible improvements of the Dutch CPS in terms of responding to families' needs and children's rights.

By paying attention to parents' positive experiences, this study is helpful to inform the CPS about good examples and positively contributes to the image of the CPS. The dominating negative image of child protection can lead to fear and insecurity and higher thresholds for parents to ask for help (Dale, 2004; Nanninga, Reijneveld, Knorth & Jansen, 2016; Studsrød et al., 2014).

In addition, this study provides insight into the experiences of parents with different phases of the child protection chain, not being limited to merely one phase of the CPS (e.g. the investigation). This study underlines the importance of this broad focus, as the participants did not always explicitly distinguish the different phases; many experiences (and thereby themes) were linked to their "journey" throughout the *overall* chain of child protection. Thereby, this article provides insight into the importance of following the parent and the parent's story and experiences instead of dividing the CPS theoretically or organizationally.

Furthermore, this study provides specific insight in parents' feedback for adequate support in cases of domestic violence or ongoing fights after a divorce. For example, the important discussion on the negative consequences of labelling family's situations as a "high conflict divorce" too easily or the explanation of the need of very concrete agreements between parents are valuable contributions to the knowledge of needs of a specific group of parents involved in the CPS.

In addition to the existing literature on parents' experiences with child protection services, this article provides insight into new themes in the experiences of parents, such as the need to be decisive and the importance of getting a clear picture of the family's situation. For instance, the importance of "investigating the truth" for parents in this study could provide interesting directions for future studies on other countries' child protection systems and studies specific for experiences of parents involved in the child welfare system because of ongoing fights, allegations, and disagreements between parents during or after divorces. Moreover, this study shows how parents underline the importance of the working environment of professionals, which needs to facilitate professionals (by providing enough time, money, and knowledge) to meet families' needs. Here, parents unparalleled address—besides the level of the direct interaction with professionals—the necessity of (more) attention to this on the level of policy and politics.

Some limitations of our study lie in the sample. First, the recruitment was based on self-selection and the response rate was low. Although we did not aim to have a representative sample in this small-scale qualitative study, we realize that our sample possibly involved a specific group of parents, not representing the experiences of *all* parents in child protection. For instance, as for 19 out of the 20 families mandatory child protection measures were enforced, we missed experiences of parents with shorter trajectories and only involvement of the AMHK and voluntary support. Experiences of these parents may be different (Petersen, 2018; Studsrød et al., 2014). Second, we do not have much information on parents' background (e.g. socioeconomic situation, level of education, and migration background) and could not link this to the analysis of their experiences. We chose not to ask for this information to give parents as much narrative freedom as possible.

Another limitation of this study lies in our analysis. Although we analysed the interviews thoroughly in an inductive way staying close to the parents' individual stories, we aggregated themes across stories and did not present unique themes of individual interviews. Furthermore, we did not discuss the analysis of the individual interviews with the participants. The involvement of parents in the analysis of their story could have further benefitted the accuracy and reflexivity of our data analysis (Probst, 2015).

4.2 | Recommendations

4.2.1 | Future research

More attention should be paid to the experiences of parents with the CPS who had a shorter process in care and/or who received voluntary support. Besides this, investigating parents' perceptions of "involuntary" and "voluntary" interventions is needed; as parents in our study often agreed with compulsory measures, it is interesting to learn whether and how parents make this distinction.

First, this study shows the importance of the parent-professional relationship and the necessity of being open to

parents' experiences and needs. However, these alliances with parents can be experienced as very complicated in the field of child protection. This paper provides first insights into its importance, which could be a starting point for future research on *how* to improve working in partnership with parents, specifically in the challenging context of child protection. Besides this, our study provides insight into two other important themes: "getting a clear picture of the family's situation" and "do something." Future research on whether those themes are specific for the Dutch CPS could further develop knowledge on those aspects.

4.2.2 | Practice

The parents in our study found it important to tell their story, aiming to help other children and parents by contributing to improving the CPS. Parents' balanced feedback on dimensions that are according to them essential to change the family's situation in the best interests of the child provides important insights for child protection policy and practice. Our study shows the importance of paying attention to the overarching system and the institutional contexts and rules, as they have to facilitate individual professionals in supporting families and therefore in the protection of children. For example, parents' experiences with many different professionals involved and turnovers are important to consider (Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Studsrød et al., 2014).

Furthermore, a deeper knowledge of parents' experiences with the topics "determining the truth" and "high conflict divorces" could contribute to current discussions in the Netherlands and thereby to the improvements of the Dutch CPS. There could be many "truths" in child protection cases and, according to parents, especially in cases of high conflict divorces. Further research on these topics could support professionals in this challenging task.

Finally, professionals need to be aware that parents' experiences shape their attitudes towards the system. Therefore, attention to parents' experiences and feelings should be an important focus in child protection practice, no less important because parents should be dealt with fairly and humanly, but also as parents' attitude is important for positive outcomes. Forrester et al. (2012) argue in their study on parents' resistance in child protection that this is not just a result of "difficult clients or difficult situations," but also of the interaction between professionals and parents. They state that empathy, reflecting and good listening with a focus on both the child's safety and parents' well-being can help professionals to tackle parents' resistance. By not (promptly) responding to requests for help by parents who are eager and open to support initially, great potential for early intervention and parental cooperation may get lost (Petersen, 2018).

Although this study underlines the importance of partnership with parents, it also shows the complexity of partnerships in the CPS. For instance, professionals could possibly experience a tension between children's and parents' interests and between parents' advice of being decisive and parents' wishes of being taken seriously. An important implication for dealing with this complexity could lie in the

connection of child protection and family support. Fargion (2014) explains how this could change the attitude towards parents and improve working in partnership with parents by a changed attitude towards child protection in which "an abusive parent is somebody to be helped, not just stopped" (Fargion, 2014, p. 26). In line with the UNCRC, collaborating with and supporting parents in their child protection process is needed to fulfil children's rights and to serve their best interests (CRC, 2009).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the parents who participated in this study for sharing their personal experiences. Furthermore, we want to thank Floor Middel, Mirjam Boelens, and Debbie Rutten who were involved as student assistants in this study and the professionals of the AMHK and RvdK for their effort in the recruitment of parents. This article reports on the results of the research project HESTIA, which is supported by the NORFACE program Welfare State Futures.

ORCID

Helen Bouma  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7791-7971>

REFERENCES

- Alpert, L. T. (2005). Research review: Parents' service experience—A missing element in research on foster care outcomes. *Child & Family Social Work*, 10(4), 361–366. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2005.00387.x>
- Arbeiter, E., & Toros, K. (2017). Parental engagement in child protection assessment: A qualitative analysis of worker and parent perspectives. *International Social Work*, 60(6), 1469–1481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872817706409>
- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 385–405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307>
- Ayala-Nunes, L., Jiménez, L., Hidalgo, V., & Jesus, S. (2014). Family feedback in child welfare services: A systematic review of measures. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 44, 299–306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.07.004>
- Baarda, D. B., De Goede, M. P. M., & Van der Meer-Middelburg, A. G. E. (2007). *Basisboek interviewen. Handleiding voor het voorbereiden en afnemen van interviews [Basic book interviewing. Guide for preparing and conducting interviews]*. Groningen/Utrecht: Noordhoff Uitgevers B.V.
- Bergman, E., De Feijter, J., Frambach, J., Godefrooij, M., Slootweg, I., Stalmeijer, R., & Van der Zwet, J. (2012). A guide to research paradigms relevant to medical education. *Academic Medicine*, 87(4), 545. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0b013e31824fbc8a>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (2009). General Comment no. 12. The right of the child to be heard. Geneva: United Nations.
- Dale, P. (2004). Like a fish in a bowl: Parents' perceptions of child protection services. *Child Abuse Review*, 13(2), 137–157. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car837>
- Dumbrill, G. C. (2006). Parental experience of child protection intervention: A qualitative study. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 30, 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2005.08.012>
- European Court of Human Rights. (n.d.). European Convention on Human Rights. Retrieved from: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/-Convention_ENG.pdf
- Fargion, S. (2014). Synergies and tensions in child protection and parent support: policy lines and practitioners cultures. *Child & Family Social Work*, 19, 24–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00877.x>
- Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). London: SAGE publications.
- Forrester, D., Westlake, D., & Glynn, G. (2012). Parental resistance and social worker skills: towards a theory of motivational social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 17, 118–129. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00837.x>
- Ghaffar, W., Manby, M., & Race, T. (2012). Exploring the experiences of parents and carers whose children have been subject to child protection plans. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(5), 887–905. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr13>
- Healy, K., Darlington, Y., & Feeney, J. A. (2011). Parents' participation in child protection practice: Towards respect and inclusion. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 92(3), 282–288. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.4126>
- Hoogveld, W. (2015). Forse groei vechtscheidingen: mensen vinden elkaar niet meer. [Rapid growth high conflict divorces: people do not find each other anymore]. Trouw. Retrieved from: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/force-groei-vechtscheidingen-mensen-vinden-elkaar-niet-meer-a21fb98f/>
- López López, M., Bouma, H., Knorth, E. J., & Grietens, H. (2018). The Dutch child protection system: Historical overview and recent transformations. In L. Merkel-Holguin, J. D. Fluke, & R. D. Krugman (Eds.), *National systems of child protection: Understanding the international variability and context for developing policy and practice*. Cham (ZG), Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG.
- Memorie van Toelichting bij de Jeugdwet [Explanatory Memorandum to the Youth Act] (2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten-en-publicaties/kamerstukken/2013/07/01/memorie-van-toelichting-bij-de-jeugdwet.html>
- Morris, K. (2012). Thinking family? The complexities for family engagement in care and protection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(5), 906–920. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr116>
- Mortelmans, D. (2011). *Kwalitatieve analyse met Nvivo. [qualitative analysis with Nvivo]*. Leuven, Belgium: Acco.
- Munro, E. R., & Ward, H. (2008). Balancing parents' and very young children's rights in care proceedings: decision-making in the context of the Human Rights Act 1998. *Child & Family Social Work*, 13, 227–234. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2007.00542.x>
- Nanninga, M., Reijneveld, S. A., Knorth, E. J., & Jansen, D. E. M. C. (2016). Expectations of barriers to psychosocial care: Views of parents and adolescents in the community. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 25(1), 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-015-0717-1>
- Nu.nl. (2015). Aantal vechtscheidingen groeit explosief [Number of high conflict divorces increases explosively]. Retrieved from: <https://www.nu.nl/werk-en-privé/4122297/aantal-vechtscheidingen-groeit-explosief.html>
- Petersen, S. K. (2018). Parents' experiences of child protection practice in Denmark. *Child & Family Social Work*, 23, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12451>
- Probst, B. (2015). The eye regard itself: Benefits and challenges of reflexivity in qualitative social work. *Social Work Research*, 39(1), 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svu028>
- Raad voor de Kinderbescherming (2017). Actieplan na congres Waarheidsvinding. [Action Plan after Congress Determining the Truth]. Retrieved from: <https://www.kinderbescherming.nl/over-ons/nieuws/2017/11/23/actieplan-na-congres-waarheidsvinding>
- Raad voor de Kinderbescherming (2018). *Jaarbericht RvdK: Kijk op Kinderbescherming. [year report RvdK: View on child protection]*. The Hague: Author.

- Reekers, S. E., Dijkstra, S., Stams, G. J. J. M., Asscher, J. J., & Creemers, H. E. (2018). Signs of effectiveness of signs of safety? A pilot study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 91, 177–184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.06.012>
- Smithson, R., & Gibson, M. (2017). Less than human: A qualitative study into the experiences of parents involved in the child protection system. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(2), 565–574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12270>
- Srivastava, P., & Hopwood, N. (2009). A practical iterative framework for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 76–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800107>
- Studsørd, I., Willumsen, E., & Ellingsen, I. T. (2014). Parents' perceptions of contact with the Norwegian child welfare services. *Child & Family Social Work*, 19(3), 312–320. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12004>
- Tilbury, C., Osmond, J., & Crawford, M. (2010). Measuring client satisfaction with child welfare services. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 4(1), 77–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548730903563160>
- Trotter, C. (2008). What does client satisfaction tell us about effectiveness? *Child Abuse Review*, 17(4), 262–274. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.1038>
- United Nations. (n.d.). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>
- Vriesema, I. (2017). Jeugdzorg in de knel bij vechtscheiding. Klachten over 'partijdigheid': Ouders strijden niet alleen tegen elkaar, maar ook tegen de jeugdbeschermer. [Youth care in difficulties in high conflict divorces. Complaints about 'partiality': Parents do not only fight each other, but also the child protection worker] NRC Handelsblad. Retrieved from: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/09/01/jeugdzorg-in-de-knel-bij-vechtscheiding-12735209-a1571888>.

How to cite this article: Bouma H, Grietens H, López López M, Knorth EJ. Learning from parents: A qualitative interview study on how parents experience their journey through the Dutch child protection system. *Child & Family Social Work*. 2019;1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12723>